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AUTHOR Misenheimer, Carolyn
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ABSTRACT

The most effective vehicle for fostering a love of history in children is the use of historical novels. There are many excellent children's novels of American history, some quite simple and ideal for younger or less proficient readers. Since children tend to form a generalized picture of life and of people in a given era, they should be introduced to as wide a spectrum as possible through their own as well as the teacher's reading. Two books presenting contrasting views of the American colonial rebellion against England's George III are "Fair Wind to Virginia," by Cornelia Meigs, set in the Colonies and "The Reb and the Redcoat," by Constance Savery, which takes place in England. "Touchmar," by Mildred Lawrence, speaks of the lives of young girls during the 1770s, and particularly of girls who wished to have careers. Enid Meadowcroft's story "Silver for General Washington" tells of the training of Washington's troops at Valley Forge. In "Rebel Siege," Jim Kjelgaard portrays the fiercely independent frontiersmen of the southern colonies during the Revolution. Finally, "Johnny Tremain," by Esther Forbes, while difficult for all but the most accomplished fifth graders to read on their own, enthralls every child because it delineates many historical figures, such as Paul Revere and Joseph Warren, and gives children a clear concept of what being American really means. (A list of novels with Revolutionary War settings is appended.) (HTH)

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Using Historical Novels to Foster a Love of History

by

Carolyn Misenheimer
Assistant Professor of Elementary Education
Indiana State University

The traditional instruction in history that most people receive does little to capture the child's interest or fire his imagination with the excitement of human history. Yet if a child is to develop a deep and lasting interest in history, from his first encounters with the subject he needs to feel the tumult, the power, the dramatic tension of the lives that have preceded ours. He needs to learn to assume the identities of historical figures, to wrestle with their problems, to share their anxieties, their hopes, their ambitions for themselves as well as for their countries. In short, the child needs to experience history vicariously but vividly. Although unfortunately in our society it is popular to demean enthusiasm for the study of history, the elementary teacher is fortunate in having the pupil before he acquires a prejudice against it. Indeed, the elementary school child is usually amazingly open-minded and willing or even eager to be pleased by new areas of learning. How, then, can a teacher use the child's natural enthusiasm to unlock a door to romance and adventure which has eluded countless people in the past?

Part of the key is the teacher's own genuine enthusiasm grounded in knowledge of and respect for the subject matter and also in a keen sense of the high adventure of learning. The most effective vehicle for fostering a love of history in children that I have found is the use of historical novels written for children. Since many children either cannot or will not automa-

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tically read such books, it behooves the teacher to read a few to them. There are, of course, several other good reasons for a teacher's reading to a class. One is that such reading bespeaks the importance of reading. Another is that the teacher can in this way introduce the class to really good literature. Still another is that through this medium one can present the moral values of past ages, the misconceptions of natural events, the unchanging reality of constant change, the dangers of bigotry and prejudice, and the grandeur of the human spirit. Yet another valid reason for reading to a class is that by giving the class a common experience which is individualized by each child's reaction to it, the teacher fosters a feeling of camaraderie and of caring within the class. This helps the child develop a sense of belonging to his school family. Whenever a child feels secure in his world, he is more receptive to new ideas.

In our country, we are fortunate to have many excellent children's novels of American history. Some of these are for advanced readers, but others are quite simple and are ideal for younger or less proficient readers. The teacher may wish to read more difficult books to the class but show some of the easier ones or even have a display or a room library of books of varying degrees of difficulty as well as of various historical eras, locations, and life-styles. The child tends to form a generalized picture of life and of people in a given era. He should, therefore, be introduced to as wide a spectrum as possible through his own reading as well as the teacher's. This adds depth and color to his perception and causes history to live for him.

A good book to begin with is Fair Wind to Virginia by Cornelia Meigs. This book takes an English-born boy and girl from their birthplace in the English countryside across the Atlantic on a typical small sailing ship to Williamsburg, Virginia, a small settlement in America which serves as a seat of colonial

government, a home for higher learning, a place where old English customs and laws and architecture somehow acquire a new flavor, a new shape and tone, a modification into something new called American. It is also a hotbed of revolution against a distant and unsympathetic king. Eventually the children travel westward to the Shenandoah Valley where they see an already softened edge of westward expansion. This book helps children to understand the varying reasons for English emigration to America and for the subsequent shifts of loyalty from the English king to a separate American government. It also gives them vivid pictures of daily life in various parts of eighteenth century America for various types of people from slaves to royal governors, from indentured servants to young children made homeless by political strife. This book provides a sound introduction to the American adventure.

Another book I enjoy using is The Reb and the Redcoats by Constance Savery. Since this book is set in England and concerns the children of an English family staunchly loyal to George, III. and a captured American officer (aged fifteen), it gives the class a totally different view of America and of the American Revolution from any other the children are likely to encounter. From this intriguing story modern children learn that the issues as well as the people involved in the American Revolution were not clear-cut, one-dimensional entities. The children can identify with the English children's concern for their father who is a British officer serving in America and simultaneously can identify with the American officer who is alone and friendless in a hostile country. By exposing children to this kind of situation, one can hope to teach them to see present-day issues and people as three-dimensional.

A book that speaks of the lives of girls during the 1770's and particularly of girls who wished to have careers is Touchmark by Mildred Lawrence. This

story is set in Boston in the turbulent year 1773 and focuses on an orphaned girl who longs to be apprenticed to a pewterer. Although such an occupation is unthinkable for any female, she eventually attains her goal while at the same time she uses her quick wits and her highly developed powers of observation as well as her many contacts with other apprentices and tradesmen to carry messages which further the American cause. This story encourages ambitious girls by showing them that even two hundred years ago a clever and determined girl could sometimes overcome the prejudices of the times and become an artisan.

Still another book which I like to share with children is Silver for General Washington by Enid Meadowcroft. This story opens in Philadelphia near Independence Hall but moves quickly to Valley Forge, a small, quiet farm village as yet untouched by the colonists' fight against Great Britain. Soon, however, the whole area becomes a campground for the American Army; and the villagers are horrified when they realize that the army is really no more than a loosely organized band of eight thousand men ravaged by hunger, cold, and disease and by hopeless depression and worry about families left at home. The children delight in hearing about two boys who help capture a spy and then brave the dangers of British-held Philadelphia to secure funds for General Washington. As von Stueben turns the fiercely independent men into obedient, well-trained soldiers, the army begins to take pride in itself and to develop confidence and hope so that in the spring when the British begin to move, the American Army steps out with new courage to meet its foe. The children in the book also develop new courage. In addition, they learn to appreciate freedom and to feel that its attainment and preservation are worth great sacrifice. There is much humor in this, and much pathos.

Because as a battleground for independence the southern colonies are often ignored, I find it well to include in my reading a book set in that vital area.

Since many of the Whigs there are fiercely independent frontiersmen, born in England or Scotland but driven to America by economic need, they represent an entirely different type of rebel, different, that is, in background and in education, from those of New England, of the Middle Atlantic colonies, or of the larger population centers such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, or even Charleston. They are accustomed to a meager, harsh existence with a constant threat of Indian massacre or of starvation. Still, even those dire threats to survival pale for them beside the threat of complete domination by the British king and of dispossession of their hard-earned land by the crown. The inner struggle that one such settler endures before he can decide between loyalty to a far-off monarch and adherence to the rigid code of ethics on the frontier illuminates with realistic detail the agony of conflicting loyalties which people encountered during our revolution. It is this agony which Jim Kjelgaard portrays with great sensitivity and ultimate triumph in Rebel Siege. Once again children can see that the events of history are dictated not only by the spirit of an age but also by the reason and by the emotions of its individual people. This book also gives an accurate and gripping albeit bleak picture of life on the forward edge of the western frontier. It strips away the romantic facade of high adventure, only to reveal the greater and more enduring adventure of the survival of mankind, impeded not by shackles of outside forces but only as his own imagination, endurance, and determination bind each person to his personal goals.

Finally, as the climax of my year of reading to my class, I read Johnny Tremain by Esther Forbes. This Newbery Award winner is difficult for all but the most accomplished fifth graders to read on their own, but its story enthralls every child. Because it delineates many historical figures, including John Hancock, Paul Revere, James Otis, Joseph Warren, Josiah Quincy, and Samuel and

John Adams, the deliberate fomenters of rebellion in Boston, because it depicts a number of historical events such as the Boston Tea Party, the closing of the port of Boston, and the first battle on Lexington Green, the entire book carries the ring of truth, immediate and compelling. The teacher can emphasize whatever he chooses, be it character development, the maturation of a boy, the daily life of eighteenth century apprentices, the daily life of Boston in that age, or the slow but steady development of the idea that America must be free. The author herself puts enough emphasis on the last of these points to impress upon children the differences with which our founding fathers begin their efforts and the circuitous routes of thinking, of reasoning which many of them follow to reach one conclusion--that America must be free. Still, this point is made more effective if the teacher discusses the evolution of this innovative concept with the class. Samuel Adams decides quite early that freedom is his goal, but his reasons are very different from those of James Otis. As Johnny Tremain, and through his eyes the class, sees these differences, he begins to grasp something of the complexity of human thought and of human emotions. As the tension in Boston mounts, ultimately encompassing even the most passive inhabitants, the children share Johnny's hopes and also his doubts and his fears; for Miss Forbes paints the horrors of war as well as the satisfaction of successful revolt. In the end, she helps the children to understand that the struggle for freedom is difficult and never-ending and that it is one of the noblest of all of humanity's causes. This book, Johnny Tremain, gives children a clear concept of what being an American means.

In the literary sphere, Johnny Tremain is a beautifully written book, full of marvelous scenic descriptions, compelling characterizations, intriguing plot structure, and mind-stretching vocabulary. By focusing on an apprentice, it clarifies many of the differences between the daily lives, the educational

opportunities, and the reasonable expectations of many boys in the eighteenth century and those of boys today. It illuminates the importance of commerce and of the absolute necessities of life, and it depicts the changes in people as their affairs prosper or suffer. Consequently, the children learn incidentally many details about the eighteenth century and also about human nature, details which can help them in later life.

Probably in one year no teacher can read all the books I have mentioned. Time will not permit that, but it is good to know about a number of books covering a wide range of backgrounds and points of view. To facilitate that knowledge, I have attached a partial list of appropriate books. From it each teacher can make selections suitable for his class and can recommend others to individual pupils. One can even read excerpts from several books either to highlight certain events or details of an historical era, to illuminate the character of an historical figure, or to tantalize children and thereby entice them to seek out the books for themselves. For the teacher it is stimulating to experiment with various books and approaches as his own interests and needs as well as his children's shift. Every teacher needs some flexibility in both procedures and materials. Because it is many-faceted, using novels to nurture a love of history in children provides that flexibility and adds the fillip of genuine pleasure through historically sound vicarious experiences.

Appendix

Suggested List of Books with Approximate Reading Levels

Allen, Merrit P. Battle Lanterns (5 and up)

Beatty, J. Who Comes to King Mountain? (6 and up)

Brady, Esther Wood. Toliver's Secret (4-6)

Collier, James L. My Brother Sam Is Dead (6 and up)

Davis, B. Black Heroes of the American Revolution (5 and up)

Edmonds, Walter D. The Matchlock Gun (4-6)

Field, Rachel. Calico Bush (4 and up)

Finlayson, Ann. Rebecca's War (5 and up)

Forbes, Esther. Johnny Tremain (6 and up)

Forbes, Paul Leicester. Janice Meredith (5 and up)

Fritz, Jean. And Then What Happened, Paul Revere? (2-4)

Fritz, Jean. Early Thunder (6 and up)

Fritz, Jean. Where Was Patrick Henry on the 29th of May? (3-5)

Fritz, Jean. Will You Sign Here, John Hancock? (3-5)

Fritz, Jean. Why Don't You Get a Horse, Sam Adams? (3-5)

Gauch, Patricia Lee. The Impossible Major Rogers (4-6)

Gauch, Patricia Lee. This Time, Tempe Wick? (3-5)

Griffin, J. B. Phoebe and the General (2-5)

Hall, Donald. The Oxcart Man (1-2)

Kjelgaard, Jim. Rebel Siege (5 and up)

Lawrence, Mildred. Touchmark (5 and up)

Lawson, Robert. Mr. Revere and I (5 and up)

Lowrey, J. S. Six Silver Spoons (easy)

Malvern, Gladys. Dear Wife (5 and up)

McGovern, Ann. The Secret Soldier (3-5)

Meader, Stephen. Guns for the Saratoga (easy)

Meadowcroft, Enid. Silver for General Washington (5 and up)

Meigs, Cornelia. Fair Wind to Virginia (4 and up)

Milhous, Katherine. Through These Arches (5 and up)

Monjo, F. N. King George's Head Was Made of Lead (2-4)

Page, Elizabeth. The Tree of Liberty (8 and up)

Perl, Lila. Slumps, Grunts, and Snickerdoodles (4 and up)

Phelan, M. K. Midnight Alarm (3-6)

Pope, E. M. The Sherwood Ring (6 and up)

Savery, Constance. The Reb and the Redcoats (5 and up)

Taylor, T. Rebellion Town (5 and up)

Webberley, J. John Treegate's Musket (6 and up)